

Brand: a Simple Name or a Criterion in Purchasing Decisions?

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The decision to buy or not a product by the consumer is based on a number of factors and criteria according to which it triggers. Starting with the utility designed to meet a specific need, product characteristics, price or even a unique method of promotion, all influence the consumer's decision to purchase a product.

In a period of overconsumption, in which more and more brands appear in all sectors of society, in which the displayed image tends to have a growing importance for humans, even in a declarative level, this work aims to discover if the brand is just a name registered, to identify a company or became himself a criterion for the consumer in purchasing decisions as well as the price for example. Field of study of the chosen theme is tourism, and to find the answer to the question we conducted a qualitative research, using the technique of collecting information in depth interview and focus group site. These were applied to two categories of respondents, i.e. people with decision maker in ten travel agencies from Bucharest and a group of people who have direct contact with customers, such as sales agents, ticketing agents, receptionists and public relations specialists.

The purpose of this work is to observe the influence of brand when a consumer decides to choose a destination, a hotel, a carrier or a travel agency for their travel needs.

The results obtained were classified according to the importance given to the brand in relation to the other criteria associated with the purchase and highlights the extent to which a consumer is influenced by reputation, prestige and the attributes associated with the brand of a company operating in the field of tourism, when it decides to go on a journey.

Key words: brand, purchase decision, trademark, travel agency, selection criteria

JEL classification: M31, L83.

1. Introduction

Image is one of the main issues noticed on an object, thing or situation encountered, either considering the real image or the one perceived by every individual separately. The manner how the image of a product reflects in the mind of a consumer is related on the one hand with what the company has tried to express, and mainly to the experience of consumer and how it is perceiving the attributes associated to the image of such product.

In order to pass from a simple trademark to a brand naturally it is necessary that notoriety, the significations associated to the mark by the consumer are supported in reality by an attachment based on loyalty, respect and acknowledgement concerning the brand and even the manufacturer, as well as on identifying with the attributes promoted, preference for the products traded under the name of such brand and the possibility to effectively produce the purchase, in close connection with the availability of satisfying the demand of manufacturer, on the one hand, and that of buying the product by the consumer, on the other hand. On the contrary, although the consumer may appreciate a particular brand, it does not actually contribute to the evolution of the brand in material value, but in a certain extent, if any, to the perpetuation of the name, respectively increase of notoriety.

In tourism, brand is less visible than wide consumption goods, for instance, or goods in general, since in this case the consumer enters in contact in a majority proportion with the rendering of services. For the services to be different from the goods, these present certain specific characteristics, formulated by Philip Kotler and subsequently taken over by the specialists in the field. These are applied to all categories of services, however in tourism it presents certain particularities (Olteanu, 2006). These appear as a range of activities having as object the meeting of all needs of tourist during the trip and its seating (Minciu, 2001). Therefore, the main categories of brands over which the work will focus the research are represented by the tourism agencies and the brands of partner hotels or transportation companies, as well as on their representatives and even the employees who enter in direct contact with the client.

2. Current stage of knowledge

In order to present an overall image of the manner how the brand interferes in taking decisions on

the level of companies, and mainly on the level of consumer, either individually or industrially, a range of studies of specialised literature has been analysed. On turn, these surprise situations when the brand determines or not the act of purchase and who much the image of a brand may represent for the image of an individual in the society.

In the attempt of identifying the moment when the B2B brands influence the decision of organisational consumers, Brown et al. (2011) have examined the relation existent between the risk of purchase and the sensitivity to brand. They have relied on the hypothesis according to which the organisational buyers tend to rely on objective criteria in taking decisions related to the products that they buy and, also, that the potential influence of subjective criteria, such as the brand, is decreasing with the increase of risk. Another work hypothesis, considered pursuant to some detailed interviews with different managers, suggests that the brands with role of reduction of the risk, relying on the idea that their influence on the decisional process increases depending on risk. The results obtained showed that the relation risk – sensitivity on a brand depends on the intensity of competition, therefore the negative and positive effects are stronger when the intensity of competition is low.

The risk related to purchase in case of touristic services is high due to various reasons. The services, in general, are influenced by staff and by the quality of its performance, however in tourism the potential dissatisfactions which may appear may ruin definitively the holiday of your dreams, the good mood of the client who has limited time for relaxation (in general the period of the holiday), and from here to the disadvantages attached to the image of the brand of the service provider only one step is left.

The sensitivity to the brand depends to a great extent, in tourism, on the relation developed by client with such company on long term. Thus, as the relation with the tourism agent, local guide, organizer of trips is longer, the sensitivity of client to the brand of the tourism agency increases more since it will associate the brand of the agency with the quality relation developed with its employee. Thus, the sale is from individual to individual, and the brand is associated qualities and virtues from human sphere, such as respect, trust, empathy between the client and the tourism agent, knowing the needs and preferences, acknowledgement among other brands, gratitude for living some pleasant experiences during the holidays and, obviously, the feeling of the consumer that it may rely on such brand every time it needs to satisfy the necessity of relaxation and spending a pleasant holiday.

Another study, related to the decision of purchase, analyses the impression that the brand creates to consumers in case of selecting smartphones. Liu and Liang (2014) have analysed, using as tool of research the questionnaire and technique of eye following, three issues: actual system of the product, external aspect of the product and the image and imprint left by the brand. The results are rather concluding and do not leave place for interpretations, therefore 71% of respondents were inclined to spend more money to buy the favourite brand of smartphones. Most of them have directed towards a brand even in the detriment of following the specifications of the product and rate. In addition, the study shows as well the fact that the logo is the most important criterion considered by consumers when deciding to buy a product.

Analysing the influence of the name of brands in the clothes' industry on consumers, Li et al. (2013) have noticed that certain companies choose to name the brand both in English and Chinese, both variants presenting advantages and promoting a particular popularity of the brand through cultural differences. Therefore, it has been noticed that consumers have a positive attitude towards the cultural connotations of a brand, the popularity of a brand increasing due to these, and to the satisfaction of clients. They consider that the name of a brand written in English has a higher popularity and a high satisfaction of clients to a certain extent. At the same time, the clothes with name of brand written in Chinese may spread their cultural connotations easier. However, the consumers consider that the simple name in English does not guarantee the intentions of purchase as being very high, but rather that the manufacturing company providing quality products and rendering better services may create to the consumer a good purchase experience.

The smartphone may be considered a good with long term use, if one ignores the speed of evolution of technologies and of promotion of new telephones every year, even more often. Also, the clothes worn, subject to certain trends changing from season to season and from year to year are goods worn on sight and the brand of which, as in case of phones, tend to be visible, as there is a logo specific to a brand, a line of clothes, a specific seam, a particular material, cut etc. The consumers tend to invest in issues such as the brand, logo as visible as possible and other such visual representations, since there are issues that make the difference within the group, help them to display the social status, the fact that they afford to buy certain

products, with a higher rate or even it provides them the confirmation as their membership to a certain group, entourage, with the same living level and thus it is followed and alignment and keeping up to them.

If it is approached the field of tourism, here the brand is less displayed and more exploited. Thus, the brand of the hotel where we spend our sejour is not displayed, however the atmosphere created and the services provided are reflected in the mood of guests and in a particular uniqueness in rendering services. For instance, all clients of a certain hotel receive a chocolate candy upon arrival and leaving of hotel, on breakfast, all tables are decorated with fresh flowers, the entire staff greets politely and offers every time a wide smile to the guests, the music in the hotel is always classical/Greek/rock etc., the smell inside the hotel is always of canella/coconut/vanilla and any other particularities that make the clients remember the experience lived and identify it through the senses, perceptions and feelings had during the holiday spent there.

Following the determination of the facts that influence the sensitivity centre on brand, Brown et al. (2012) have investigated what leads a centre of sensitivity in purchase to the information related to a brand. The complexity of purchase and sensitivity to brand seem to refer to a U program, but only in the light of the moderating effects of product's tangibility. The relation between the complexity of purchase and sensitivity to brand seems to be stronger when the purchasing companies are smaller and have prior contractual relations with their sale partners.

In tourism, if one analyses the relations between the tourism agencies and partner hotels from different touristic destinations, the complexity of purchase and sensitivity to brand tend to be higher if the agency collaborates with the same hotels for longer intervals (maybe even years), is satisfied with the quality of lodging services provided to the clients of the agency, and the relation consolidates every year. The relation is more complex since, in this case, are developed more than strictly professional relations, even relations between human beings, of friendship, a partnership between the tourism agent and tourist, tour operator-hotel and, eventually, one reaches to the basic relation human-human translated by agency-hotel-tourist, respectively tourism agent –hotel-client.

Mohaidin (2012) studies the economic conduct approach of the decision of consumer related to the brand, explaining its sensitivity to price. The price differences between the concurrent brands are, in general, considered as being too low to be able to influence the reasons to decide for a particular brand. However, the results obtained show, on individual level, that the reasons of purchase of consumers show a connection between price and the selection of brand, as well as that the consumers maximise the profit which every individual influences to a certain extent by daily consumption.

Returning to the services from tourism, the price is still one of the main methods of making a service tangible. Therefore, mainly in tourism, where every tourist has a pre-established budget for the services that it shall enjoy (i.e.: transportation to destination and back, lodging at destination, meal services, as well as the budget afferent to other trip costs), the price has the role to imprint to the touristic service a particular value as well as the association to a high qualitative level or perception on the level of providers and even of the destination.

3. Methodology of research

The work relies on the study of specialised literature related to brand and the evolution of this topic in years, as well as a qualitative research, organised in Bucharest between 4-22 November 2014, having the role to particularise the study in the field of tourism.

The techniques of collecting information were the detailed interview and focus group and were applied on two categories of respondents, respectively individuals with power of decision in ten tourism agencies carrying out the activity in Bucharest and a group formed of 30 individuals entering in direct contact with the clients, employees of the selected tourism agencies, such as: sale agents, ticketing agents, receptionists and specialists in public relations.

The selection of representatives with power of decision from tourism agencies is not incidental. The strategic marketing planning is a complex process of determining and maintaining an optimum relation between the objectives, training of staff and the resources of an enterprise, on the one hand and the marketing mix, reported to market conjuncture, on the other hand.

The definition is also valid in the field of tourism, stating that the process is much more complex due to the multiple and diversified products and touristic markets. Therefore, the marketing planning in

tourism determines the enterprise to carry out a range of activities: to look for an answer to the questions related to market, competition, environment etc.; sets forth marketing objectives on definite term; sets forth the strategies necessary to achieve the objectives and elaborates marketing programs for their implementation; identifies target markets and provides the mechanisms of evaluation of the performances reached in order to be able to continue the planning in the future as well (R.J. Calantone&J.A. Mazanec, quoted in Stăncioiu A.F. et al., 2005). In this context one notices the need of correlation of importance of brand for the consumer with the importance paid even by the representative of the company holding the brand, since the company launches it and has responsibility over the contact or with the market.

The main *hypotheses* of work are:

-> every tourism agency has a brand name, in which it invests more or less interest depending on budget or skills of the specialists with whom it collaborates;

-> upon the purchase of a service or good, from touristic industry or not, a consumer holds a range of criteria based on which it guides the purchase and with the help of which it takes the decision to purchase, to postpone or not to purchase;

-> the individuals with power of decision within an agency are liable for the strategic trends of company, therefore they know the brand, its importance, the attributes associated thereof and the direction of the business;

-> the staff entering in contact with the client has direct feedback from it, knows its dissatisfactions and appreciations, the impression created about the agency, as well as the market pulse related both to the agency for which it is working and to the other competitors on market;

-> the brand represents, for many goods of wide consumption and mainly of those from the category of long term use, the main criterion based on which the consumer relies its purchases and it is possible that the services follow the same ascendant trend related to the brand of providing company on the perceptions of consumers.

4. Analysis and results of research

The detailed interview with the decisional factors of the agency was semi-structured, directed mainly towards the image of the agency brand, associations made inside the company, the manner how one wants to perceive the services rendered and which are the motivations which may determine a client to select such brand in the detriment of other.

In order to determine to what extent it is known the tourism agency from the perspective of presence on market, a question of the interview concerned the life of the brand. Considering the seniority of such brand on Romanian market, the situation of the ten agencies appears according to the data in Figure 1.

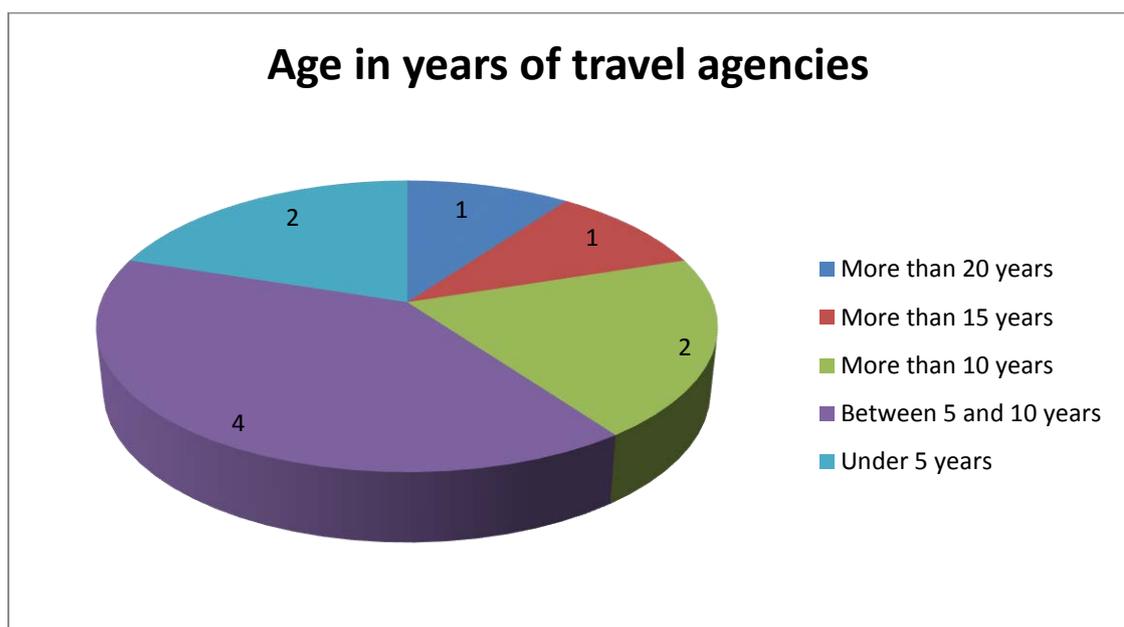


Figure 1. The age of trademarks travel agencies surveyed on Romanian market
(Source: created by the author based on the results of the research)

Therefore, it is noticed that a tourism agency of those targeted has an experience in the field of over 20 years, another agency of over 15 years, two are in the category of over 10 years and 2 in that under five years, whereas the highest figure, of four agencies, are included between 5 – 10 years. This is relevant related to the brand considering that, the agencies with higher seniority may have a higher notoriety only considering that their name exists on market for more years, it was subject to a higher number of promotion campaigns and, consequently, has entered in contact several times with the consumer.

Another question asked to agency managers concerning the issues on which they focus in promoting the touristic packs or different destinations present in portfolio. The scope was that of determining the place of brand in relation to all the other possible issues which could be mentioned.

In the Table 1 are presented, using a scale with 5 steps, where 1 means not important at all, 2 - less important, 3 – indifferent, 4 - important and 5 - very important, the aspects that the agency managers mentioned related to the components of an offer meant to prevent the brand of the company that they represent.

No.crt	Issue considered	Average importance paid by respondents (overall 10) in relation with the brand	The importance given to each criterion by consumers in choosing a tourist package according to respondents
1.	Price of the pack offered	4	87%
2.	Services included	5	95%
3.	Validity of offer	3	63%
4.	Potential discounts to be enjoyed by consumer	4	98%
5.	Partner hotels	3	43%
6.	Partner transportation companies	3	54%
7.	Services not included, which may be provided against cost	2	21%
8.	Availability of offer	4	84%
9.	Taxes included (VAT, hotel taxes, other taxes)	1	85%
10.	Contact of agency/tourism agent in charge	5	91%
11.	Name of agency and/or name of hotel	5	73%
12.	Classification of lodging units	5	71%
13.	Destination	4	100%
14.	Other additional information, depending on specificity of destination/offer: issues related to children, necessary documents, useful (local) information, indications related to pets, phone numbers of embassies etc.	3	39%

Table 1. The criteria that underlie the construction of a touristic package and the importance given to them by managers of travel agencies and consumers in relation to the brand

Source: created by the author based on the results of the research

In order to have an overall image, the average of answers related to the importance of criteria considered in relation to the brand of the agency was performed using the weighted average for every criterion separately, so as to result a five-step scale overall of collected answers. The most representative criteria related to brand and promotion among consumers are, according to the answers: services included, contact of agency or tourism agent in charge to promote the pack, name of agency and classification of lodging units. Therefore, it may be determined that the agencies rely on the idea that the tourist relates the agency to a particular name, either brand or employee, the classification of partner lodging units impress quality to the services that it will enjoy subsequently and the services included in the pack justify the preoccupation of the agency to create or not attractive packs for consumers.

On the opposite pole, the agencies mention the taxes included and the services not included in the pack, which may be provided against cost, as being the less important aspects in relation to the brand of the agency. This may happen as well in the light of the fact that the taxes are not set forth by agency or by the

companies that render the lodging and transportation services, but they are determined by state, national authorities and other similar. As for the services not included, these have an optional nature, do not influence the final offer received by consumer and, thus, have no direct implications over the brand name but to the extent that they are provided as warranty for the quality of their performance.

As for the focus group performed with the help of employees of tourism agencies analysed, this had as leaving point a semi-directed interview, the interviewer being made available a conversation guide based on which the interview has been performed, meant to reach the most relevant issues for the research performed. The scope of interview was to study the feedback received by the representatives of tourism agencies from consumers related to the agency brand, by analysing their attitude opposite to the products/services offered, with the help of focus groups.

In order to determine to what extent the name of the agency is important or not for the consumer, a first question asked was whether they remember the name of the agency from where they buy the holiday or if they focus on the relation tourism agent - client.

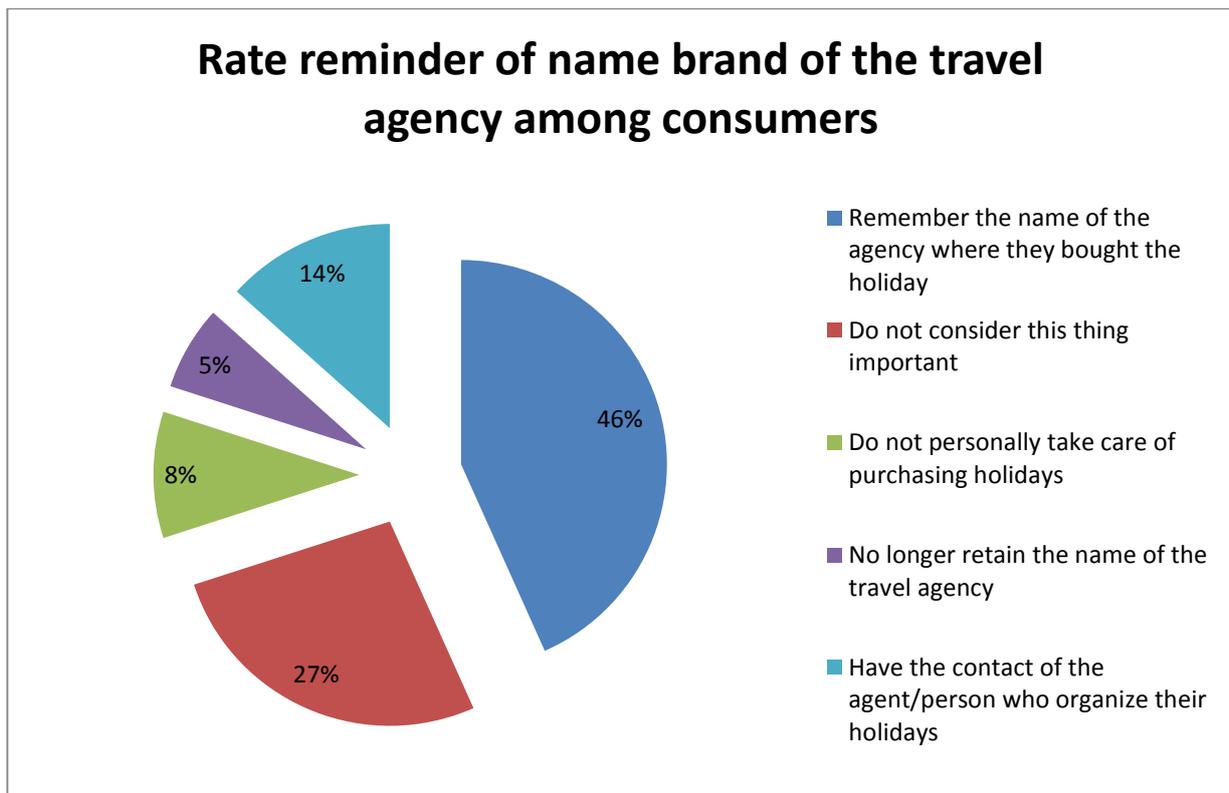


Figure 2. Rate reminder of name brand of the travel agency among consumers

Source: created by the author based on the results of the research

According to Figure 2, 46% of agents declared that the tourists remember the name of the agency through which they buy the holiday, which determines an association of the brand name with the qualitative level of the services they enjoyed. A significant percentage of agents, 27%, answered that the tourists do not consider this issue very important, thing which determines a direction of research, respectively of identification of the issues that replace the brand name as importance in the mind and priorities of consumer. Thus, it is possible that the agency used to trip, the hotel where lodged or the transportation company are not relevant issues for some consumers, but rather the destination, the place visited and the experience of the trip.

Another important percentage of respondents, 14%, have declared that the tourists have their contact in terms of tourism agencies, bookings etc. and leave to them the issues related to the organisation of holiday, therefore they relate the brand of the agency to the qualitative level of the services rendered by agents. This may prove to be useful on long term, in the light of developing some partnership relations, however the care of agency managers must consist in stimulating the staff to render quality services and create programs with effect of stimulating the employees preventing the migration of staff. Also, another issue that should concern the managers of tourism agencies consists in supervising the promotion of the

company's services in accordance with the brand image that they want to communicate to the consumer from the strategic level of the company.

Simultaneously, besides the aspects mentioned, another question discussed within the focus group targeted the identification of the place occupied by the brand in the top of the most important criteria considered by consumers in selecting a touristic pack. Thus, the tourism agents debated in turn every criterion mentioned by interviewer at the end being performed, based on the answers provided, the hierarchy presented in Table 1 (fourth column). In order to correlate the study with the results obtained pursuant to detailed interview with the managers of agencies, the criteria of selection discussed were those mentioned by managers according to Table 1 (the third column).

In the top of the answers provided by agents related to the most important criteria for consumers are the destination, 100%, potential discounts that they may enjoy, 98%, services included, 95%, agency contact, 91% and the price of pack, 87%. Therefore it is noticed the pragmatic orientation of consumers, based on the price paid comparatively to the number of services received as well as the destination which goes first in taking the decision of buying a holiday. However, such answers must be correlated, therefore the orientation towards price and the discounts provided by agencies is closely connected to the importance paid, according to 71% of respondents, to the classification of lodging units. This means that the tourist correlates the price with the quality received for the services bought and does not necessarily look for a low price with the risk of compromising the comfort and quality for which it pays a certain amount.

It must be noticed the percentage obtained by brand, 73%, either it is strictly about the name of the tourism agency, the partner hotel or other companies rendering touristic services in collaboration with the tourism agency. It may be correlated on the one hand to a prior experience of the client, which determined it to return to the same brand as guarantor of the quality of services, or to the trust paid to the tourism agent dealing with its holiday being satisfied with its services. Obviously, there must be mentioned as well the campaigns of promotion, advertising, participation to specialised events (i.e.: tourism fairs, specialised saloons, touristic events etc.) organised by agencies, having as role to increase their notoriety and visibility among the consumers and thus to increase the rate of remembering the name of a certain agency in relation to the other.

5. Conclusions

Analysing the results of research presented in the work, it may be noticed that the brand depends, in case of touristic services, on a range of specific factors, distinctly approached comparatively to the brand of goods of wide consumption for instance. The study offers only a part of the answers provided by the interviewed subjects and the questions selected are subject to the article and contain the essence of the importance paid to the brand by the managers of tourism agencies, employees, and mainly consumers, who have decision on hand when they decide to compare the services rendered by certain companies and to buy in terms of their needs and expectations.

As it results pursuant to the interview of managers, however the tourism agency may positively influence the selection of consumer if it manages to communicate effectively the attributes that support the brand and correlate it by the quality reflected in the performance of staff to presenting the services included in the touristic pack.

The inclusion of sale, ticketing, tourism agents and of the other categories of staff in direct contact with the client in the sample of respondents was not accidental. According to the answers provided by them, the consumer develops a certain relation of partnership with its tourism agent, based on trust, on the fact that it knows its preferences related to quality and level of rates, delegates it the responsibility of the trip and thus, the brand of the agency is assigned characteristics of the staff, as mentioned in the article, from human sphere. The brand of a tourism agency is charged, besides physical and visual attributes, to a certain extent pragmatic, with affective, emotional attributes, since the involvement of consumers and agents in the organisation of a holiday is direct. The holidays represent periods of relaxation, ease and spending leisure and, therefore, the expectations of tourists are always high, respectively of remaining with unique and nice moments to relate to close persons.

In conclusion, it may be stated that, although it is not a decisive criterion in selecting certain tourism agency, the brand is associated by the consumer image elements that arise its interest related to requiring an offer of price/services. If these are supported as well by a good management of brand, the consumer will

be tempted to turn to the services of such agency. Also, the seniority on market, the confirmation of perpetuation of brand in time and resistance facing an increasing competition in the field of tourism agencies, represent for the consumer a guarantee of the attention paid to the services rendered, a consolidation of the brand by focusing the strong points and a reduction of the number of aspects less favourable signalled by consumers, in the light of the experience accumulated and variety of holidays and destinations organised and targeted by the tourism agency.

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